

Orleans losing political clout

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Political clout is shifting across Louisiana as new census data require a remap of state legislative districts that will strip seats from New Orleans and give Baton Rouge and its suburbs a boost in representation.

The changes mean the once-mighty New Orleans legislative bloc is weakening, and the city's lawmakers will need more help from their neighboring suburban districts to get projects and priorities passed, even as the city still struggles to recover from Hurricane Katrina.

At least three or four state House seats are expected to be lost in New Orleans, and one Senate seat, maybe more. They'll largely shift west along the Interstates 10 and 12 corridor, with seats to be gained in the fastest-growing areas of Baton Rouge, its neighboring parishes of Ascension and Livingston, the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain and in Lafayette.

The latest release of 2010 census details contained few surprises. Lawmakers have watched the population movements closely for years, particularly since hurricanes Katrina and Rita scattered people in 2005.

Lawmakers have been expecting — and in some instances dreading — how the official data would look. Because of the latest census figures, the Legislature will meet in a March 20 special session to redraw district boundary lines for the state House and Senate, the Public Service Commission, state education board, Louisiana Supreme Court, state appeals courts and a U.S. House delegation that will drop from seven members to six.

That means politically tricky decisions of which districts and legislators to sacrifice, which two congressmen to force to run against each other and how to maintain the same number of majority minority seats.

Last time the lines were reworked, 10 years ago, two House members were drawn out of their districts entirely. This time, that number could grow much larger.



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Many of the New Orleans seats that appear to be on the chopping block have some of the newest members, meaning they have little clout, but also making it more difficult to just sacrifice districts of term-limited lawmakers who won't be running for re-election anyway.

Among the changes during the past decade:

- East Baton Rouge Parish is now the state's largest in population, with 440,171 people, leaping over both New Orleans and Jefferson Parish to take the top spot. Jefferson comes next with 432,552 residents.

- New Orleans is still Louisiana's largest city, with 343,829 people. But that's a 29 percent drop from 10 years ago.

- Baton Rouge's neighboring parishes of Ascension and Livingston had the largest percentage of growth, topping more than 39 percent each.

- Orleans, Cameron and St. Bernard parishes — all devastated by the 2005 hurricanes — had the largest percentage drops in population. Cameron took a nearly 32 percent hit and St. Bernard lost nearly half its people.

- Suburban New Orleans north of Lake Pontchartrain showed strong growth. St. Tammany and Tangipahoa parishes grew by more than 20 percent each.

Sixty-six of 105 House districts and 24 of 39 Senate districts are out of line with the numbers, including too many or too few people. The numbers in some areas are striking.

Democratic Rep. Charmaine Marchand Stiaes' district, which includes New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward, has 16,419 residents, not even half the 43,174 a House district is supposed to contain. Meanwhile, Republican Rep. Eddie Lambert's Gonzales-based district has 65,543 residents, making it one-and-a-half times the size a House district should be.

Redistricting is driven by politics, alliances, seniority and more politics. Maps are drawn to attempt to protect incumbents in many instances, but that's harder to do when population shifts have been so dramatic.

"A dose of reality is absolutely essential in this process," said Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, chairman of the state House committee that will oversee redistricting. "The numbers are what they are. There's nothing personal."

For legislators losing their seats, it probably will feel very personal.

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